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ABSTRACT

The attitudes and opinions of rural Michigan residents were surveyed on selected issues and policies in 1970. The sample included 343 respondents drawn from 34 randomly selected sampling points. Each point was a rural township from which about 10 interviews were made. Responses of the 88 farm and 255 nonfarm residents were compared in the study. Some major areas covered in the interviews were farm policy, political tactics, strikes by farm workers, and the family farm. It was found that meaningful differences in attitudes on certain social issues existed between rural subgroups, that including the respondent's sex as a control variable led to additonal insights, that farm males always supported positions interpreted as favorable to agriculture, and that the nonfarm female clearly reflected the consumer orientation. It was noted that, while it was difficult to draw many generalizations from this limited study, sex should be taken into account in future studies of farm families. (PS)

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Selected Attitudes and Opinions of Michigan's Rural Population

by
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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1970, we surveyed the attitudes and opinions on selected issues and policies of rural Michigan residents. The sample comprised 343 respondents. No urban residents were included, but many respondents residing in rural areas had little or no direct connection with agriculture. Eighty-eight were categorized as farm and 255 as nonfarm.

On three national issues—pollution, abortion reform and rural development—farm and nonfarm groups differed, but not always as expected. While 16% of the sample agreed that pollution problems are confined to urban areas, only 10% of the farm sample agreed with the statement. As to the extent of approval of liberalizing abortion legislation, 46% of the total sample approved, 45% disapproved and 8% had no opinion. In contrast, 41% of the farm group approved, 45% disapproved and 14% had no opinion. While 61% of the total sample agreed with efforts to improve the economy and life in rural areas, only 52% of the farm sample agreed.

Consensus as to the national problems demanding governmental attention was great for farm and nonfarm groups, and for most age groups. Reducing crime and air and water pollution were considered top priority problems. Each was mentioned among the three major problems by more than 60% of the respondents. Unemployment reduction, improved housing and slum clearance, and conquering killer diseases were less important.

A series of questions related to national farm policy revealed substantial support for greater bargaining power for farmers, but only moderate support for withholding produce from the market, and even less support for strikes. Except for strikes, the farm group felt more strongly than the nonfarm group on these issues.

Our sample of respondents placed a high value on the family farm. Ninety-one percent of the farm and 71% of the nonfarm group strongly agreed that the family farm should be preserved as the basic unit in American agriculture. To the related question as to whether large corporation farms, commercialized family farms or small family farms are best for American agriculture, 55% of the farm but only 35% of the nonfarm respondents said the "small family farm." Only 5% and 6% of these groups favored the large corporation farm.

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THE SAMPLE

The sample included 343 respondents drawn from 34 randomly-selected sampling points in Michigan. Each point was a rural township from which about 10 interviews were made. The farm and non-farm subgroups were defined by the extent to which a respondent's family engaged in farming. A three phase classification procedure was used:

1) The Census Bureau criteria of farm size and dollar value of annual sales was applied to each respondent;[1]

2) Those not classified as a farm family using the Census criteria were evaluated in terms of their reported occupations. If a respondent's occupation was "farmer" or "farm laborer," he was added to the farm group.

3) All still not classified in the farm group were separated according to their spouse's occupations. If the spouse's occupation was farming, the respondent was added to the farm subgroup.

All respondents not included in the farm subgroup were placed in the nonfarm subgroup. The subgroups compared consisted of 88 respondents classified as farm and 255 as nonfarm.

Demographic Characteristics

Selected characteristics of the sample of rural Michigan respondents are shown in Tables 1 and 2. A comparison of the two groups by age, sex, marital status and education level is shown in Table 1. Both groups of respondents had larger proportions of older persons than we expected to find.

Twenty-eight percent of the farm group and 27% of the nonfarm group were 60 years old and over. The farm group had a larger proportion 40-59 years old; the nonfarm group had a larger proportion under 40. Females outnumbered males in both groups, but the difference was more apparent in the farm group. The mid-summer season, during which the survey was taken, probably affected the availability of males, especially farm males, for interviews.

[1]The farm group consisted of 88 respondents. Seventy-six lived on a census-defined farm; 7 reported farming as an occupation, but did not live on a farm; and 5 reported spouse's occupation to be farming, but residence was not on a farm. Of the total farm centered respondents, 38 were males and 50 females.

TABLE 1. Selected Characteristics of the Sample by Age, Sex, Marital Status and Education for Farm and Nonfarm Respondents, in Percentages

Characteristics	Both	Farm	Nonfarm
		(In Percent)	
Age			
Under 30	18	9	21
30 - 39	18	12	20
40 - 49	20	27	17
50 - 59	17	23	14
60 and over	27	28	27
N	343	88	255
Sex			
Male	48	43	49
Female	52	57	51
N	343	88	255
Marital Status			
Married	82	82	81
Single	6	7	5
Divorced/separated	3	0	4
Widowed	8	9	8
NA	1	1	1
N	343	88	255
Education			
Less than 8 years	7	6	7
8 - 11 years	33	38	31
H. S. graduate	34	33	34
Some college, business or technical school	20	16	21
College graduate	6	7	6
N	343	88	255

TABLE 2. Father's Occupation and Own Occupation of Farm and Nonfarm Respondents, in Percentages

Occupational Category	Farm		Nonfarm	
	Own Occupation	Father's Occupation	Own Occupation	Father's Occupation
		(In Percent)		
Professional, technical and kindred	7	2	6	3
Farming	21	61	0	27
Manager, official and proprietor	3	2	7	13
Clerical	12	3	7	4
Sales	1	1	2	2
Craftsmen	5	12	19	21
Operatives	14	6	18	19
Service/private household	3	7	7	5
Laborers/miners	2	2	1	4
Never worked	27	0	27	0
NA	3	2	5	2
N	88	88	255	255

Each group had a similar proportion married, but only the nonfarm group had divorced or separated persons. The farm group had a larger proportion failing to earn a high school diploma. Furthermore, the nonfarm group was more likely to be trained or educated beyond high school. The number of persons in each group with less than 8 years of education, with a high school diploma, and with a college degree, however, was approximately the same.

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By definition, those whose occupation is farming should be in the farm group. Table 2, however, shows that two other major occupations were important in the farm group—clerical work and manufacturing (operatives). Manufacturing was a major source of employment for nonfarmers (to an even greater extent). Of the nonfarm group, 37% were employed as craftsmen/foremen and operatives. More nonfarm than farm respondents were employed in managerial positions and in service occupations.

Fathers of the farm respondents were usually farmers or craftsmen (Table 2). Though the major category for the nonfarm group was also farming, it was less than half as great as in the farm group. Other important occupations in the nonfarm group are managers, officials and proprietors, craftsmen and operatives.

Another difference in the two groups occurs when we consider what state the respondent grew up in. Ninety-five percent of the farm group as compared with 85% of the nonfarm group grew up in the North Central region. Among respondents raised in this region, those raised in Michigan were more likely to be in the farming group (87% vs. 72%).

As mentioned previously, questions pertaining to the tenancy status of respondents were also asked.[2] For the farm group, 88% owned their farms, 3% rented, 1% worked the farm on shares, and the rest could not list their farm in one of these categories. Eighty-five percent of the farm group resided on farms as defined by census criteria. None of the nonfarm group resided on a census-defined farm, although 8% lived on 10 or more acres of land.

[2]The interviewers did not ask this question of each respondent, but only of those residing on acreage large enough to accommodate significant agricultural activity. Only 1% of the farm group was not asked the question vs. 79% of the nonfarm group. In the farm group, 7% of the residences could not be classified farms using the census criteria (acreage and sales). Another 8% of the respondents could not apply the census criteria to their situation.

Attitudes and Opinions

Respondents were questioned about certain national issues and problems, and agricultural policies and practices. Views on pollution, abortion law reform and governmental policy for rural areas are given in Table 3. Rural residents, particularly those in farming, did not agree that pollution problems are confined to urban areas.

The slightly more favorable attitude of nonfarm respondents toward abortion law reforms is explained by the more approving attitudes of nonfarm respondents and the large number of farm males (26%) undecided on the issue. When evaluated on the basis of sex alone, the women disapproved of abortion law reform more than men. Although the nonfarm group favored liberalized abortion laws slightly more, an equal portion in each group opposed reform.

Contrary to expectation, a smaller proportion of farm than nonfarm respondents agree with the government's policy to improve the economy and life in rural areas. The proportions agreeing are 52 and 64%, respectively. This variation is explained by the much lower percentage of farm women (46%) who agreed. They also had the greatest amount of disagreement and uncertainty toward government policies.

Responses to the question, "Which three of these national problems (Respondent is handed a card) would you like to see the government devote most of

TABLE 3. Responses of Farm and Nonfarm Respondents by Sex Regarding Three National Issues, in Percentages

Question A. Do you agree or disagree that pollution problems are confined to urban areas?

	FARM GROUP			NONFARM GROUP			BOTH		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	All
Agree	11	10	10	14	22	18	13	18	16
Disagree	87	88	87	84	77	80	85	80	82
No opinion	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343

Question B. Now, could you please tell us whether you approve or disapprove of liberalizing abortion legislation.

Approve	40	42	41	51	45	48	48	44	46
Disapprove	34	54	45	40	51	45	39	52	45
No opinion	26	4	14	9	5	7	13	4	8
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343

Question C. Do you agree or disagree with the government's policy to improve the economy and life in rural areas?

Agree	61	46	52	64	65	64	63	59	61
Disagree	26	30	28	22	17	20	23	21	22
No opinion	13	24	19	14	19	16	14	20	17
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343

its attention to in the next year or two?" are reported in Tables 4 and 5. The card listed the following problems:

1) trying to improve housing, clearing slums;
2) trying to beautify America;
3) trying to reduce pollution of air and water;
4) trying to improve highway safety;
5) trying to reduce unemployment;
6) trying to reduce the amount of crime in the U.S.;
7) trying to conquer killer diseases;
8) trying to reduce racial discrimination;
9) helping people in poor areas;
10) trying to improve public education.

Selections are cross-classified by the individual's farm/nonfarm status and his age. For all age groups there is a consensus in the problems ranked first and second.[3] Crime and pollution received the top two rankings by sizeable margins in each age group (Table 4). Some differences in the order of these two problems did occur in the different age groups. Only farm respondents under 30 years of age ranked crime and three other problems—public education, racial discrimination and unemployment second.

Age group variations in perceiving national problems ranking third, fourth and fifth in importance are very slight among farm and nonfarm respondents. The most often chosen problems are killer diseases, unemployment and housing/slums. However, the ordering of these problems does vary so that differences between certain age groups occur. For example, only three age groups, the farm groups aged 30-39 and 40-49 and the nonfarm group aged 30-39, ranked public education as high as fifth.

"Helping people in poor areas" was mainly the concern of the young and the old but not of the middle-aged. Nonfarm respondents under 30 and over 60 ranked this problem fifth (28% and 29%, respectively). The farm age group 30-39 years also ranked it fifth with 18%. None of the age groups 40-49 and 50-59 ranked the problem in the top five.

Racial discrimination was mentioned only by those farm respondents under 30 (30%) and between 30-39 years (18%) and by the nonfarm age groups 30-39 (29%) and 50-59 (22%).[4] When the problems ranked one through five were controlled by sex of respondents only minor variations occurred—even when these subgroups were separated by the farm-nonfarm categories.

TABLE 4. National Problems Considered Most Important[a] by Rural Michigan Residents, in Percentages for Selected Age Groups

Problem	Under 30 yrs.	30-39 yrs.	40-49 yrs.	50-59 yrs.	Over 60 yrs.	All Ages
			(In Percent)			
Housing/slums	34	32	25	32	32	31
Beautify America	10	8	6	4	6	7
Pollution	64	62	57	56	66	61
Highway safety	8	6	10	16	20	13
Unemployment	23	22	43	37	33	32
Crime	43	62	67	74	65	62
Killer diseases	34	30	37	28	26	30
Racial discrimination	26	27	13	21	15	20
Help poor	24	22	18	12	27	21
Public education	24	28	22	18	4	18
NA	10	0	0	4	3	3
N	62	63	67	57	93	343

[a]See footnote #3 on page 5.

[3]Problems were ranked by computing the percent of respondents in each subgroup selecting a given problem as one of their three choices. Using these percentages, the problems were ranked from highest to lowest based on the number of persons in the subgroup selecting a problem. In the case of ties, those problems receiving the same percentage of choices, were given the same rank. The problem with the next highest percentage received the rank appropriate to its ordinal position based on 11 positions (10 problems and "NA" response). For example, no problems were ranked three, four, or five for the "under 30" farm subgroup because of the four-way tie for second.

[4]Only two black males are included in the sample.

TABLE 5. The Five Most Important National Problems Mentioned by Males and Females in the Farm and Nonfarm Groups

Farm and Nonfarm, by Sex	Number of Respondents	Rank of Problem and Percent Selecting				
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
MALES						
Farm	38	Crime (71%)	Pollution (61%)	Disease (47%)	Housing (34%)	Unemployment (26%)
Nonfarm	125	Pollution (65%)	Crime (62%)	Unemployment (34%)	Disease (33%)	Housing (27%)
Both	163	[a]Pollution (64%)	[a]Crime (64%)	Disease (36%)	Unemployment (32%)	Housing (28%)
FEMALES						
Farm	50	Pollution (64%)	Crime (60%)	Unemployment (36%)	Disease (30%)	Race (28%)
Nonfarm	130	Crime (62%)	Pollution (58%)	Housing (37%)	Unemployment (29%)	Poor & Disease (24%)
Both	180	Crime (61%)	Pollution (59%)	Housing (33%)	Unemployment (31%)	Disease (26%)
TOTAL	343	Crime (62%)	Pollution (61%)	Unemployment (32%)	Housing (31%)	Disease (30%)

[a]Tie in rank.

Farm Policy Opinions

All respondents were asked a set of six questions pertaining to national farm policies and farm practices. Opinions of the nonfarm group were generally less intense than those of the farm group. Choices tend to cluster at the middle of the opinion scale. Also there was an increase in the number of respondents unable to express an opinion. Farm males had a very low proportion of "don't know" responses (5% or less per question). The level of "don't know" responses for farm females was generally lower than for nonfarm males, although there were exceptions. Nonfarm females had a high proportion of "don't know" responses, ranging from 10 to 19% per question.

Not a single respondent in the farm group felt that farmers did not need greater bargaining power (Table 6, question A). Nonfarmers did not feel as strongly about the need for greater farmer bargaining power. Only 60% strongly agreed in such a need as compared with 75% of the farm group.

Political Tactics

The farm group had a consistent minority favoring certain "power politics" tactics by farmers for protecting their interests. When asked about three specific tactics for achieving greater economic power—national organization, withholding and strikes (questions B, C and D)—less than half of the farm respondents strongly supported any of these actions. Opposition to these tactics ranged from 17% (national organization, question B), to 24% (withholding, question C), to 52% (strikes, question D) in the farm group.

The responses of male and female farm respondents differed sharply. Most females were much less supportive of power tactics. They were in moderate agreement of the need for national organizations while the males reported strong agreement. The moderate position of females as compared to males is especially evident in the questions on withholding products and on strikes.

TABLE 6. Responses to Five Questions on National Farm Policy for Males and Females of the Farm and Nonfarm Groups, in Percentages[a]

	FARM GROUP			NONFARM GROUP			BOTH		
	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	Both	Male	Female	All
Question A. To what extent do you feel that farmers should have greater bargaining power in marketing their products?									
Strongly[b] agree	76	76	75	64	57	60	67	62	64
Moderately[c] agree	21	18	19	29	30	29	27	27	27
Do not agree	0	0	0	5	8	3	4	1	2
DK	3	6	5	3	12	7	3	11	7
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343
Question B. Some farm organizations operate on a national basis. To what extent do you think that producers of each major farm product should be organized nationally?									
Strongly agree	61	36	46	25	24	24	33	27	30
Moderately agree	21	42	33	54	53	53	46	50	48
Do not agree	18	16	17	22	4	7	13	7	10
DK	0	6	3	10	19	15	8	16	12
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343
Question C. Farmers should determine what prices they will accept and then withhold their products until these prices are paid.									
Strongly agree	55	26	38	38	30	34	42	29	35
Moderately agree	24	36	31	42	38	39	37	37	37
Do not agree	16	30	24	18	22	20	17	24	21
DK	5	8	7	3	11	7	4	10	7
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343
Question D. Farm workers should use strikes when they feel they are receiving unfair treatment.									
Strongly agree	37	10	21	34	17	25	35	15	24
Moderately agree	26	18	22	34	35	35	32	30	31
Do not agree	34	66	52	25	35	30	27	43	36
DK	3	6	5	7	14	10	6	12	9
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343
Question E. How important do you think it is to preserve the family farm as the basic unit in American agriculture?									
Strongly agree	87	94	91	73	71	71	76	77	77
Moderately agree	8	4	6	22	15	18	18	12	15
Do not agree	3	–	1	2	2	2	3	2	2
DK	3	2	2	3	12	7	3	9	6
N	38	50	88	125	130	255	163	180	343

[a] The choices offered the respondents were "very great," "great," "some," "slight," "not any," and "dont know." In Question E, "important" is substituted for "great."
[b] "Strongly agree" combines the "very great" and "great" responses.
[c] "Moderately agree" combines the "some" and "slight" responses.

Nonfarm persons also supported the use of "power" tactics. They were somewhat uncertain about the need for national organizations of farm producers (15% have no opinion), yet those totally opposed are fewer (7% vs. 17%) than in the farm group. They also favored withholding products from market more than the farm group (73% vs. 69%). Only 30% of this group opposed strikes by farm workers.

Opinions of men and women in the nonfarm group were generally similar. However, women had less action-oriented outlooks and more "don't know" responses. Nonfarm women were least likely to strongly agree to a need for greater bargaining power by farmers. Except for farm women, they had the greatest opposition to a withholding tactic to raise farm prices. On the strike issue, nonfarm women took a position similar to farm males, falling between the greatest and least action-oriented subgroups, nonfarm males and farm females.

Strikes by Farm Workers

Most farm respondents, when classified by occupation, were located at the extremes of the attitude scale in regard to strikes. Only 22% of the total farm group took a middle-of-the-road position on strikes by farm workers. White collar workers favored strikes slightly more than blue collar workers (33% vs. 28% strongly supporting this tactic). Seventy percent of the "nonworkers" (primarily housewives and students, excluding the unemployed and retired) were opposed to strikes by farm workers.

Nonfarm blue collar workers favored strikes by farm workers more than nonfarm white collar workers (36% vs. 15%). This is opposite of the farm group pattern. Also, there was a shift in the category of "nonworkers,"[5] from an overwhelming opposition to strikes (70% in the farm group) to a much lower opposition (29% in the nonfarm group). The lower level of strong support among white collar workers was a shift in the intensity of the attitudes. The proportion in the nonfarm group opposed to strikes was still less (37% vs. 43%) than white collar workers in the farm group. Thus, among the nonfarm blue collar categories the intensity of support increased and disapproval decreased.[6] Furthermore, craftsmen and foremen showed the strongest support for strikes. Nonfarm operatives had equal proportions at both extremes, while the percent of service workers opposed was less than in any of the farm blue collar occupational categories.

Variation between farm and nonfarm respondents is explained by sex as well as occupation (Table 6). Approximately 50% of the farm female respondents were classified as nonworkers. This subgroup is almost one-third of the total farm group. Comparison of the three remaining subgroups (farm males, nonfarm males, nonfarm females) shows a more moderate variation by sex. Thus, farm-nonfarm status produces variations between occupational groups independent of a respondent's sex.

The Family Farm

Two farm policy questions dealt with the family farm as an ideal in American agriculture. There was overwhelming support for preserving the family farm as the basic unit in American agriculture (Table 6, question E). Support for the family farm was strongest among farm females (94%) followed by farm males (87%). The male-female differences in the nonfarm group (73% vs. 71%) were very small.

Farm and nonfarm groups were subdivided by the occupation of the respondent's father, which was designated either as "farming" or "nonfarming." In the farm group, only slight variations in importance of preserving the family farm resulted from differences in father's occupations. Surprisingly, those whose fathers were farmers were slightly less committed than those with nonfarm fathers (94% and 100% giving affirmative answers).

Occupations of fathers of nonfarm respondents had little influence on their feelings about preserving the family farm. Generally, the nonfarm group was favorable, though the feeling was not as strong as in the farm group. Only 71% of the former as opposed to 91% of the latter strongly supported preserving the family farm.

When asked, "What is best for American agriculture?", farm group respondents who were children of farmers favored the large family farm to a greater extent (39% vs. 35%) than did children of nonfarmers. The latter were more favorable toward large corporation farming (9% vs. 2%). Both had the same proportion (56%) who considered the small family farm best.

Differences by father's occupation were found also in the nonfarm group. Children of farmers favored (46% vs. 32%) the small farms over the large family farms. Those with nonfarmer fathers preferred (50% vs. 36%) the large family farms over the small ones.

[5]The category "Nonworkers, etc." comprises 31% of the farm group and 32% of the nonfarm group.

[6]Only one exception to this pattern occurs. Strong support by service workers and laborers decreases (40% vs. 15%) from farm to nonfarm groups. However, the total disapproval also decreases (60% vs. 40%) as in the other blue collar jobs.

As a whole, the nonfarm group favored (46% vs. 35%) the large family farm. The "don't know" respondents in the nonfarm group was six times larger (12% vs. 2%) than in the farm group.

Sex as as Variable

Thus, meaningful differences in attitudes on certain social issues existed between rural subgroups. Including the respondents' sex as a control variable led to additional insights regarding the attitudes of rural Michigan's population. The sex variable was most evident in this sample's attitude toward abortion reform laws and withholding farm products from market. Farm females were surprisingly consistent in their position **vis a vis** the other subgroups (i.e., farm males, nonfarm males and nonfarm females). They showed the greatest opposition to activist strategies and the strongest support for traditional family farms.

Farm males always supported positions interpreted as "favorable to agriculture." The male and female nonfarm respondents fluctuated, sometimes showing greater support of activist tactics than farmers, but at other times showing less enthusiasm. Much of this ambivalence seems to depend on the issue. Does the issue have direct implications for the nonfarmer as the consumer or is it directed toward more abstract social values? Most nonfarm men had a low commitment to traditional agricultural values, but accepted certain principles of economic activism (i.e., strikes). However, they were cautious regarding the farmers' need to gain more power in the marketplace. This may be a conflict between their economic values and their social status as consumers.

The nonfarm female clearly reflected the consumer orientation. She combined a relatively low commitment to agricultural ideals with a consumer's apprehension toward increased farm power. These individuals were more tolerant of activist strategies than the conservative farm females, but the incompatability of activism and consumerism toned down such support. We can hypothesize that these women were the family shoppers and more conscious of the food market and its impact on the family budget. But the nonfarm male had a work role in our industrial society, as well as a family role. Most were blue collar workers and union members. They recognized the advantages of organizing for economic betterment.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Of all respondents, the farm female presents the most interesting case. Her attitudes on farm issues are quite paradoxical. She strongly believes in the traditional values of American agriculture as symbolized in the "family farm" ideal. The need for greater bargaining power by farmers in the marketplace is clearly recognized. Yet, she remains a consumer at heart—opposed to national organizations, withholding strategies and strikes.

It is difficult to draw too many generalizations from this limited study. However, we can make a strong case for the need to take sex into account in future studies of farm families. This need may be particularly acute in areas where part-time farming has been introduced recently. Perhaps the husband in such families is being socialized into a new social milieu of the factory, learning new social norms and values but his wife remains on the farm and in her traditional role. This social isolation may be reinforced by physical distance. Thus, the last exponents of the more traditional farm values are farm women.

6-72—3M